

RICH Grantmaking: The Evolution of Grantmaking by the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities

by
Mary-Kim Arnold, Executive Director, RICH
August 2010



On Wednesday, February 4, 2009, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities (RICH) held its first-ever State House Press Conference. Nearly 100 guests attended to hear RICH outline its new strategic direction and announce 16 major grant awards, which totaled more than \$106,000. Members of Living History's 14th Rhode Island Black Regiment, a RICH grantee, presented the colors and led the audience in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

In 2008, when we began our strategic planning process, the philanthropic landscape was grim. Total giving to all types of charities in the U.S. was down 5.7%.¹ Giving to the arts and humanities saw a record 9.9% decline from 2007 levels.

In Rhode Island, many cultural organizations reported a “perfect storm” of converging funding crises: a reduction in sponsorships and contributions from corporations and small businesses; state funding drying up; and operational costs rising.

It was against this backdrop that the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities (RICH) was reassessing its own work. Leadership transitions at the board and staff levels, coupled with the NEH self-assessment process, presented us the opportunity to review our current activities with an eye toward developing a long-term vision and plan.

RICH has long been recognized in Rhode Island for a kind of fearless support of community-initiated projects. Grantees applaud our willingness to take risks, as well as the engaged way in which we work with applicants to develop the humanities components of ideas in their early stages. We know that many of our grantees value this approach, which can help to build the organizational capacity of small cultural agencies.

Through the planning process – the discussions with board and staff, focus groups of stakeholders, a review of existing and past programming, and an environmental scan of the Rhode Island cultural landscape – several key themes emerged.

- Despite an impressive and diverse portfolio of (council-conducted) programming, our core identity remained that of grantmaker;
- As a grantmaker, we distinguished ourselves by our willingness to take risks and to work with nontraditional audiences;

¹ All rates of change are adjusted for inflation and provided by Giving USA, a publication of Giving USA Foundation™, researched and written by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.

- Although modest by some standards, our funding often played an important role for smaller organizations, and for larger-scale projects, could often help leverage additional support;
- By showcasing the projects and the organizations that we supported with grant funding, we could add value to our grant funding.

Our strategic plan, adopted in December of 2008, was designed to deepen our commitment to our core strengths, build on the history of our investments throughout the state, and expand our profile and visibility by advocating for the projects and organizations that with our support, help us to fulfill our mission.

Since adoption of our plan, we have increased our grants budget by 50% between 2008 and 2009, and another 66% beyond that for 2010. To support grantees beyond the funds, and to assist in building their capacity, we created a series of workshops for grantees to come together to share expertise. We also have begun to institutionalize a large, public event to announce the grant awards. In January of 2009, we held our inaugural press conference in the Rhode Island State House to announce our major grant recipients. Grantees were encouraged to invite board members and organizational supporters, as well as to alert their local lawmakers. In addition to the media, we invited statewide elected leaders, many of whom made congratulatory messages during the brief speaking program, and a reception following the announcement gave ample opportunity for photos and networking. Several media outlets picked up on the event, and ran announcements listing the grant awards with descriptions of the funded projects. Early in 2010, we held a similar event.

With additional NEH funds we received in FY2010, we were able to develop a grantmaking initiative to address an existing need in Rhode Island: professional development and curricular support for K-12 civic education. RICH had taken an active role in developing the state standards in civics several years ago. However, funding for implementation and support of these standards has been limited. Serious financial challenges mean more cuts to municipalities and schools, and professional development budgets are often vulnerable. In June of this year, we announced an additional \$80,000 in grants to schools and K-12 partners for civics education. We had the good fortune to time our announcement of these awards with the visit of NEH Chairman Jim Leach, and to showcase these grantees at a special event with Chairman Leach, along with the Honorary Chairs of our Council, U.S. Senator Jack Reed and U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse.

By scaffolding our grantmaking with activities such as these, which allow grantees to leverage as much value from our funding as possible – through media attention, by connecting with other organizations doing similar or related work, and through technical assistance – we believe that we are using our resources more effectively than if we tried to create programming for the wide range of issues and questions that we seek to address.

Next on the horizon, we will continue to rethink the scope of our grantmaking program. As vital as our project support continues to be for many organizations, we also recognize the value of general operating support (GOS), particularly to our small historical societies and cultural agencies, many of which operate with largely volunteer staffs. As recipients of GOS grants ourselves, we know firsthand that flexibility can allow for experimentation and creativity, which can help an organization learn more about its own capacities.

The projects we support are thrilling in their diversity and in the range of their aspirations. Some take an intimate look at individual lives through interviews and oral histories to create a portrait of a family, or neighborhood or community. Others seek to interrogate systems and institutions, to draw attention to injustice. It seems particularly courageous at times like these – when we tend to expect immediate proof of impact, usually financially-defined, for all our efforts – to undertake these explorations of human thought and action.

What we learn by being the only funder in Rhode Island who focuses specifically on such explorations, is that there is a real need to continue to claim a space in public life for intellectual curiosity: to support work that does not simply aggregate information, but seeks to interpret it, to question the wisdom of a public discourse that is motivated by political or financial gain, and to place the humanities to the center of public life and not at its margins.